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Koenig, Matthias

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Koenig, M. (2006). Cultural constructions of modernity in the world polity. In K.-S. Rehberg (Ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheit, kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in München. Teilbd. 1 und 2* (pp. 2871-2882). Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-143324>

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Cultural Constructions of Modernity in the World Polity

Matthias Koenig

In the first years of the 20th century, at the time when Max Weber was about to publish his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the Chinese scholar and reformer Kang Youwei, drawing on both Confucian traditions and the utopian literature of 19th century Europe wrote his *Book of the Great Community* (Datongshu).¹ While the immediate purpose of this quite astonishing book was to explain the failure of half-hearted reform policies in Imperial China and to propose strategies for Chinese national recovery, it also contains a more general analysis of social inequality as well as a theory of human progress and evolution. One by one, Kang thought, humankind would eliminate the boundaries of family, gender, class, occupation, law and nation. Self-centered nation-states would be substituted by larger federations, before eventually, under the pressure of a World Parliament, the »Great Community« would be achieved. National frontiers would be replaced by a mathematically precise administrative division of the world based on the latitude/longitude grid, all people would be linked to one another by global networks of electronic communication, all races would blend into one race through migration and intermarriage on a global scale, women's rights would be achieved through the elimination of family structures and through strict equality of women and men before the law, and the struggles over social inequality resulting from industrialization would be resolved by the eradication of property and poverty. It was Kang himself who considered this vision »too advanced for the times« (Spence 1980, p. 73) and, indeed, neither the Emperor's court officials nor the younger generation of intellectuals who later became the carrier group of the Chinese Revolution took up his ideas. However, it is not so much the political impact of Kang's utopian ideas, but their underlying awareness of globality coupled with a strong epochal consciousness that should attract our interest. While Weber was still trying to come to terms with the occidental *origins* of modern rationality and its »universal cultural

¹ Kang's book was posthumously published in Chinese in 1935; for the historical context cf. Spence 1982: 58–74.

significance»², Kang approached its global *consequences* directly, by envisioning a worldwide social order in which Confucianism would be no less uplifted than Christianity. Kang's vision thus articulates modernity as a global condition.

Putting into brackets the content of Kang's rather speculative social theory and reflecting on the »light of cultural problems« (Weber 1988b, p. 214) by which it is inspired, we see in anticipation the enormous problems shift that has taken place in sociological theory in the late 20th century. At the core of this problems shift lies the historical experience of a decentering of occidental modernity, an experience that has given rise to various attempts of »unthinking the social sciences«, to use Immanuel Wallerstein's rather drastic expression.³ This decentering of occidental modernity has a *temporal*, *spatial* and *social* dimension. Firstly, as the ongoing debates on post-modernity, second, third or reflexive modernity indicate, classical European modernity is increasingly regarded as a temporal sequel within a larger epochal formation. As a consequence, its presumably universal patterns of social evolution, differentiation and integration are seen as historically contingent – hence the contemporary revival in historical sociology.⁴ Secondly, the discussions on globalization and the transformation of the nation-state have led to sustained critiques of the »methodological nationalism« (Martins 1974) entrenched in sociological theory. Against the spatial model of a territorially and nationally bounded societal community, the global or the transnational are commended as more adequate levels of social theorizing. And thirdly, discourses of post-colonialism, subaltern studies and indigenous sociologies have heightened the awareness of non-occidental social formations in modernity and have led to an increased self-reflexivity in Western sociological discourse (Wittrock 1999).

While this problems shift in the sociological discourse of modernity clearly separates us from Weber with respect to the substantive questions we ask, his theoretical agenda of historical comparative macro-sociology has retained and perhaps even regained its attraction and therefore merits further theoretical elaboration (Schwinn 2003). In the past two decades, two promising theoretical approaches have appeared that try to develop the Weberian paradigm in light of the contemporary problems shift: the comparative analysis of civilizations and the neo-institutionalist analysis of world society. At first glance, these two approaches seem to imply contradictory conceptions of modernity. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, who has been a major protagonist in the renaissance of civilizational analysis, has since the 1970s emphasized the divergence of modernity's institutional configurations in the context of

2 To use the expression from Weber's »Vorwort« to the revised version of his »Protestantische Ethik« and the »Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen«; see Weber 1988a, p. 1.

3 See Wallerstein 1991; for a more balanced analysis see Wallerstein et al. 1996.

4 For the problematic role of historical sociology with respect to the problems shift in sociological discourse of modernity see notably Calhoun 1999.

different traditions or, as he later prefers to say, Axial Age civilizations. Consequently, he has proposed the notion of »multiple modernities« that is currently attracting much theoretical interest. By contrast, John Meyer and other neo-institutionalists, basing their arguments on evidence from quantitative longitudinal cross-national comparisons, have repeatedly found convergence, isomorphism and standardization of formal structures of nation-states, organizations and individual actors, world-wide. Modernity thus appears in the singular, as a global condition institutionalized in what Meyer interchangeably calls »world society« or »world polity«.

Yet in spite of these seemingly contradictory conceptions of modernity, I would like to argue that both approaches are amenable to theoretical cross-fertilization. To develop this argument, I first suggest that both share some common conceptual ground in emphasizing the cultural construction, political project and universal reference of modernity. Then, in a second step, I identify the gaps and holes in both theories that call for further elaboration and propose some lines of inquiry for a research agenda that combines the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. And finally, in a third section, I would like to substantiate this argument by drawing on evidence from on-going comparative research on cultural constructions of secularity and institutional varieties of secularism in the world polity.

1. »Multiple Modernities« and »World Polity«: Common Conceptual Ground

To advance the claim that the theoretical approaches related to the notions of »world polity« and »multiple modernities« are compatible, it is first of all necessary to establish some common conceptual ground. Here, I wish to draw your attention to three characteristic points that, in my opinion, are shared by both research programs.

Firstly, they see modernity at its most basic level – and in line with Weber’s interpretative sociology – as a *cultural construction*, with culture being conceptualized as an abstract analytical category.⁵ Eisenstadt’s interest in the cultural dimensions of modernity follows from his foundational theory of human action and social order which, beyond its structural-functionalist origins, is rooted in an analysis of the

⁵ And not as a concrete and bounded world of beliefs, to use William Sewell’s (1999, p. 39) conceptual distinction.

existential problems of meaning and reflexivity.⁶ Modernity is understood as a cultural program characterized by a distinctive set of cosmological and ontological premises, of which the most important are the awareness of contingency and uncertainty combined with a faith in the inner-worldly realization of transcendent visions (Eisenstadt 2003). Meyer's conception of modernity is, in turn, based on a strictly phenomenological reading of Weber's theory of rationality. For him modernity is characterized by the construction of cognitive frames of ultimate means, means-end-schemes and actor identities by which both action and actors are constituted and legitimized (cf. Meyer 1987). Thus both approaches partake, at least to some extent, in the so-called cultural turn in sociological theory, conceiving modernity as a horizon of expectations, an *imaginaire* or, to use Björn Wittrock's expression, as a set of »promissory notes« (2000, p. 37) that explains the increased propensity for social change. Modernity as an epoch is in other words defined by modernity as a project.

Yet, both approaches clearly go beyond what might so far appear as culturalist reductionism by analyzing the institutional frameworks in which modernity as a project is enacted. In this regard, they secondly share a strong emphasis of the *political* arena as primary site of institutional projects oriented at variously interpreted horizons of expectation. Thus, according to Eisenstadt, the political center acquires charismatic qualities under conditions of modernity, and collectivities are increasingly politicized. Meyer argues in a similar vein that it is the State onto whom divine agency and sovereignty are devolved and who in the course of his structural expansion has become the major collective actor of societal reconstruction. The primary institutional form of modernity is, for both authors, the nation-state with its structural coupling of political organization and collective identity. By theorizing the pivotal role of the nation-state and of the political in the constitution of modern society they provide an important correction to the systems-theoretical account of functional differentiation.⁷ For they explain not only why institutional arrangements of functional systems, or autonomous value spheres, were established at the level of the nation-state, but also why functional differentiation has developed within the nation-state in the first place.

The third point of common conceptual ground that I would like to mention concerns the *universal reference* inherent to modernity. Obviously, this aspect is most clearly pronounced by Meyer who sees the nation-state as embedded within, and legitimized by, wider institutional fields, first restricted to the European state-system

6 On this aspect of Eisenstadt's conceptual framework, which is influenced by Martin Buber's social theory, see Eisenstadt 1995.

7 In fact, authors of Luhmannian orientation, are increasingly conceding the pivotal role of the nation-state and, more generally, of the political for the constitution of modern society; see for instance Nassehi 2003, p. 164ff., and Kieserling 2003.

and later, by the 19th century, expanded to the world polity. Yet, Eisenstadt equally stresses that modernity is the first type of civilization with explicit claims to universality and world-wide impact. In that respect, the notion of »multiple modernities« is perhaps misleading, since what is actually meant are varying cultural interpretations and institutional configurations of modernity.⁸ Going beyond the focus on its occidental context of origin, modernity is thus conceived by both agendas as a global cultural condition in which multiple political projects are embedded.

While these points of common conceptual ground would certainly merit more thorough analysis, we may tentatively conclude that theoretical cross-fertilization between the two approaches, which share a similar anti-evolutionary historicism, seems at least to be *possible*.

2. Towards Theoretical Elaboration

In a next step, I would now like to show that such cross-fertilization is not only possible, but also *necessary* to fill some of the gaps and holes that are characteristic of each theory. Thus, while the neo-institutionalist approach fails to explain why modernity was actively imported by political and intellectual élites in non-occidental contexts, Eisenstadt's approach does precisely that. Highlighting the common grammar of Axial Age civilizations that consists in the tension between transcendental and mundane orders, it identifies major cultural factors that account for the receptivity of non-occidental contexts to the cultural program of modernity. As a consequence, however, it also stresses that different interpretations of that program and different institutional projects have emerged depending on the configurations of institutional frameworks, social movements, and élites characteristic of various civilizations. To put it differently, we have to take into account historical path-dependency of social change in the course of modernity's global diffusion, an assumption that is actually compatible with the neo-institutionalist approach, but – perhaps due to their typically quantitative research design – has not been fully explored by »world polity« studies so far.⁹ Conversely, the strength of the neo-institutional research agenda lies in the analysis of the social processes and mechanisms of global diffusion that are left rather unspecified in the »multiple modernities« literature. Modernity as a global condition is not only postulated but analyzed in research

⁸ To re-capture a term from comparative political economy; see Hall/Soskice 2001.

⁹ For exceptions see Yasemin N. Soysal (1994), who in her analysis of immigration and integration policy in Western Europe takes into account both world polity discourses and different institutional trajectories of citizenship regimes; cf. also Jepperson 2002.

on inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, epistemic communities and social networks that constitute the institutional field of the »world polity« and contribute to mechanisms of coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism.

Assuming that theoretical integration of the »multiple modernities« literature and the »world polity« approach is possible and necessary opens up a broad set of research questions of which I would like to highlight two general lines of inquiry. One line of inquiry may start from assumptions of the world polity approach and addresses the question how world-level processes interact with historical path-dependencies at the level of both nation-states and civilizations. Thus, it has been a core proposition of neo-institutionalism that in highly rationalized institutional fields formal structure and activity structure are *de-coupled*. Returning to Kang You-wei and his Confucian contemporaries for a moment, we may note that decoupling has not only been endemic to modernity's global diffusion, but also highly reflexive; like in other non-occidental contexts, the Chinese and Korean reform movements have combined universal references to modernity with the maintenance of tradition as articulated in semantic schemes such as »Eastern spirit – Western technology«. To explain the actual degree of decoupling, we need to know the cultural and social factors accounting for resistance against transnational expectancy structures, their local adaptation or their full implementation within the activity structure, and it is at this point that configurational analysis might step in.¹⁰ The interaction of world-level processes with institutional path-dependencies can furthermore be explored with respect to the *institutional contradictions* inherent to world-polity precepts; these create opportunity structures for diverging institutional projects pursued by intellectual and political élites under conditions of different national or civilizational frameworks. Finally, the very *content* of world-polity discourses may also perpetuate or even generate cultural differences, for instance by cognitive and normative frames reifying and legitimizing sub-national collective actor identities. In sum, this line of inquiry would go beyond the one-sided assertions that social differences were either simply internal products of modern world society or remnants of traditional civilizational patterns. Rather the multi-causality of social change in the contexts of *both* the world polity *and* national or civilizational institutional frameworks would be stressed.

Yet, another line of inquiry can be pursued as well. Starting from the assumption of existing institutional varieties of modernity, we can trace changes of cognitive and normative expectancy structures at the world polity level. Thus, the incorporation of non-occidental nation-states in international organizations has, especially in the course of de-colonization, considerably changed concepts of state sov-

10 For a similar attempt to elaborate the neo-institutionalist approach see, in the context of International Relations, Acharya 2004.

ereignty, national self-determination and human rights. The content of world culture is thereby evolving beyond its occidental origins. In addition, the analytical tools developed by neo-institutionalist world polity research might help to understand the global dynamics of civilizations. As the global diffusion of Islamic law, politics, economy, and religion suggests, civilizations provide distinctive frameworks within which mechanisms of mimetic, normative, and coercive isomorphism operate. Against this background, one might even explore the hypothesis of the emergence of multiple world polities.

Both lines of inquiry could form part of a research agenda that, in elaboration of Weber's project of historical comparative macro-sociology, may contribute to empirically founded middle-range theories of cultural constructions and institutional varieties of modernity in the world polity.

3. Cultural Constructions of Secularity and Institutional Varieties of Secularism

Let me now spell out some preliminary elements of this research agenda with respect to what I propose to call a *sociology of the secular*. A sociology of the secular has, in my view, high strategic value for theory-building, as it allows to discern a central aspect of cultural constructions of modernity and its political projects (see also Asad 2003). In view of the above-mentioned problemshift in the sociological discourse of modernity, this research agenda consists of two dimensions: firstly, a reflexive analysis of sociological knowledge and its implicit and explicit categories of the »secular« – for indeed the »secular« is the »social« as conceived by classical sociology (Milbank 1990); and secondly, a historical-comparative analysis of cultural constructions of »secularity« and institutional varieties of »secularism«. In the following, I restrict myself to the second dimension, in order to exemplify the leverage gained by combining the »multiple modernities« approach with »world polity« theory. At the outset, I wish to clarify the concepts of »secularism« and »secularity« which are highly entrenched in the Christian background of occidental modernity (see Matthes 1995).

The concept of »secularism« primarily denotes the institutional project of differentiation between politics and religion within the modern nation-state. In early modern Europe, this project has taken the form of an institutional separation of what in medieval society was conceived as »secular« and »spiritual« authorities, of

State and Church.¹¹ At a more fundamental level, the institutional project of separating politics and religion was rooted in a cultural construction of »secularity«, understood as the social time-space within which both »politics« and »religion« are constituted. The imagination of an unlimited time-space of inner-worldly activism is in fact a major aspect of the break-through to modernity. From within Christian Axial Age culture, it is constructed on the conceptual grounds of the *saeculum* as an epoch within a larger narrative of redemption and of the *civitas terrena* as political metaphor for the mundane sphere. While this social time-space has become successively equated with the »nation«, »religion« has emerged as a new conceptual category with both generic (»religion«) and relativistic meaning (»a religion«/»religions«), which now signified a social phenomenon distinctive from other social systems and was read back into history to construct narratives of »secularization«.¹²

Already within its European context of origin, »secularism« has emerged in different institutional varieties as a function of confessional cleavage structures, ranging from statist »laïcité franco-française«, over German-type State-Church-corporatism to national churches. However, all these institutional arrangements of religion and politics were embedded in a similar cultural construction of secularity, which is distinctive from those that emerged beyond Europe and gave rise to different institutional varieties of secularism. The American model of combining a strong institutional separation of State and Church with a low degree of differentiation between politics and religion, is perhaps the best-known case in point.¹³ Of course, further institutional varieties may be expected beyond occidental modernity.

While this is not the place to analyze the cultural constructions of secularity and institutional varieties of secularism in historical detail, I briefly wish to compare three cases which are in different ways embedded in the world polity, yet equally reflect contemporary transformations of the classical model of secular nation-statehood that have occurred at that level. These transformations are epitomized by a strong institutionalization of individual human rights, including those to freedom of religion, combined with the institutionalization of sub-national collective identity frames, including religious ones. As a consequence political organization and collec-

11 It should be noted that in the course of the State's project of societal rationalization, the distinction between »secular« and »spiritual« *law* became actually blurred, since the State assumed authority over *both*; cf. Berman 2004, and Pizzorno 1987.

12 Both Eisenstadt and Meyer are quite sensible to this point. It is worthwhile to quote Meyer at length: »There is a tendency to think of Christendom and the Church as what we would now call a religious system, reading back into history the more specialized notions we now attach to the term »religion«. (...) Christendom, more reasonably, is seen through earlier (and probably modern) Western history as a much less differentiated, specialized and organizationally structured system: more a polity than a »religion« (in the modern sense)«, Meyer 1989, p. 401.

13 For the importance of the European-American difference within the sociological discourse of modernity see notably Wagner 1999.

tive identity, State and Nation, are becoming de-coupled and public expressions of religious identities legitimized world-wide (Koenig 2003; 2005).

Within the Western European context of *post-Christian modernity*, this re-definition of secularism, understood as the state's function not only to grant religious liberty, but also to promote religious diversity, has opened up new possibilities to contest established institutional arrangements between politics and religion. The French discourse on a potential »laïcisation de la laïcité«, the German debate about a pluralization of state-church corporatism and the British discussion about Anglican disestablishment, all triggered by the presence of Islam in Europe, are indicators of an on-going institutional change in that respect. However, given the importance of imaginations of secularity for national identities in Western Europe, publicized religious diversity continues in all three cases to be conceived as challenge to the secular nation-state by political élites. As due to their strong involvement in network structures and carrier organizations of the world polity de-coupling between formal structure and activity structure is problematic, conflict over the inclusion of religion in the public sphere increases and contestations of the very category of religion become endemic (Beckford 1999).

In the East Asian context of *post-Confucian modernity*, the world polity frames of secular statehood have had a quite different impact. Here the notion of religious diversity can easily be localized as a symbol of secular national identity due to the long-established tradition of recognizing a co-existence of »Three Teachings« (Pye 1995). South Korea has been a particularly interesting case in that respect. Globally legitimated notions of »religious diversity« (*chonggyo dawon chuo*) were exploited by the State in projecting national identity in the process of democratization (Koenig 2000). At the same time, pressure to organizational restructuring of various traditions increased. As the tension between transcendental and mundane orders had been expressed rather differently within Confucian civilization and lacking an institutional distinction of »secular« and »spiritual« authorities, the construction of modern »religion«, a term translated in to the vernacular (*chonggyo*) by the end of the 19th century, was rather problematic. It gives an interesting twist to Weber's *Protestant Ethic* thesis, to note that it was Protestantism who, due to its missionary success and its anti-Japanese stance in the period of colonialism, served both as a carrier of nation-building and as organizational model of »religion« according to which other Korean traditions were re-structured. Confucianism has, in turn, become subject to projects of active »religionization«, such as those promoted by the Confucian Academy in Seoul in the 1990s but also by the state in its attempt to classify religions both as individual beliefs and membership organizations. The institutionalization of secular statehood is thus paradoxically leading to a production of religions, thus giving rise to new potential conflict over freedom of religion.

The third case, coming from the Central Asian context of *post-Islamic and post-communist modernity* is of particular interest to the analysis of constitutional contradictions within the world polity.¹⁴ The Kyrgyz Republic, whose political élites took a strong orientation towards Western democracy after the break-down of the Soviet Union, has seen herself caught between contradictory cognitive and normative expectations. Against the background of late, and in fact Russian-led, Islamization in the 19th century and Jacobin secularism during the Soviet-Union, granting rights to religious liberty was an important aspect to gain external legitimacy during post-communist state building, with pressure exercised notably by American-based fundamentalist-Protestant missionaries through both political and economic incentives. This policy, however, made the Kyrgyz Republic a refuge for Islamic fundamentalist groups, who were persecuted in neighboring Uzbekistan, with the result of international criticism for deficiencies in sovereign security policy. In this context, the formal adoption of a globally legitimated discourse of »religious diversity«, indicated by various government initiatives to present Central Asia in general and the Kyrgyz Republic in particular as crossroads of civilizations, is strongly de-coupled from emerging conflict at the level of activity structure.

4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, please allow me to make two additional remarks. Firstly, if indeed, as I have tried to show, a theoretical integration of world polity and multiple modernities approach is possible and necessary, attention of macro-sociological research may be shifted in directions that go beyond the discussion on convergence versus divergence. The focus on outcomes of social change within units of analysis conceived as fixed social entities – nation-states or civilizations – may be substituted by a comparative focus on processes of cultural boundary shifts and relational mechanisms of institutional change through which such entities are constituted and continuously transformed.¹⁵

Secondly, to come back to my introductory remarks on the problemshift in sociological discourse of modernity, we may note an additional dimension of decentering European modernity. As reflexive analyses of sociological knowledge show, modernity and secularity have implicitly been understood as *normative* concepts firmly entrenched within post-Christian cultural frameworks. Understanding the

14 Here I report on some evidence from recent field-work in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2004; for an analysis of the language factor in the process of nation-building cf. Koenig 1999.

15 On the relational ontology implied in this agenda see e.g. Tilly 2002.

contemporary re-configurations of politics and religion, of which I have only hinted at some of the less violent cases, probably requires a more dialogic opening of occidental social sciences to other modes of conceiving of the secular – or indeed of the social.

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